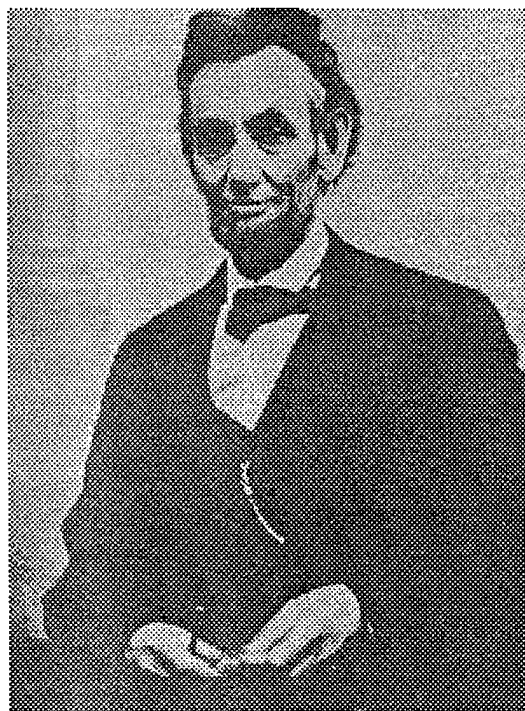


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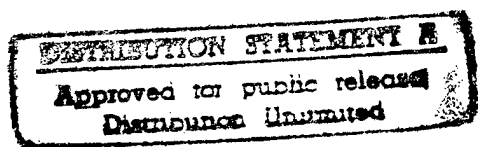
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# LINCOLN ON STRATEGY



by

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A RESEARCH REPORT

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## **ABSTRACT**

**TITLE:** Lincoln on Strategy

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When reviewing the performance of the major players of the American Civil War in terms of their ability to formulate and implement appropriate military strategy, a surprising argument can be made that the best strategist would have been one of the most unlikely candidates. This paper examines evidence that the best strategist of the Civil War was Union President Abraham Lincoln, the least experienced in war matters of any of the primary military or civilian leaders of the war. Evidence that Lincoln deserves the best strategist title is presented by reviewing (1) Lincoln's background and evidence he thought like great military strategists of the past, (2) the strategy "performance" of his contemporaries in the Civil War and, (3) how the implementation of Lincoln's strategy finally resulted in Union victory.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Lieutenant Colonel Darla M. Roberts (MBA, University of West Florida) has been interested in Abraham Lincoln for many years, having grown up in a small town in Illinois where Lincoln practiced law prior to his election as President. She was commissioned in 1978 as part of the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps program at the University of Illinois. Colonel Roberts has served in various Air Force assignments at Eglin AFB, Florida; the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado; Randolph AFB, Texas; Maxwell AFB, Alabama; and March AFB, California. She is a graduate of the Air Force Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, and is a student of the Air War College, Class of 1995.

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

In his classic volume On War, 19th century German soldier and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz writes: "The first, the most decisive act of judgment which the statesman exercises is rightly to understand the nature of the war in which he engages and not to take it for something, to wish to make of it something, which it is impossible for it to be." (14:43) When judging the strategists of any war, it is helpful to begin by reviewing what is generally accepted as Clausewitz' basic criterion for the successful strategist. Strategy in the military sense has been defined by many, but could generally be thought of as the plan formulated to meet objectives. Basic in the factors to be considered when formulating strategy is a general understanding of the nature of war itself.

A review of the Civil War's principle strategic "players" and their ability to "understand the nature of war" as Clausewitz deems essential for success, and then formulate and implement strategy, must include generals and civilian leaders as well. One of the most pivotal and tumultuous events in our nation's history, the Civil War was conducted by military leaders with impeccable credentials on both sides. The primary civilian leaders, of course, were Union President Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America (CSA). Jefferson Davis was certainly well qualified to serve as a wartime president, having extensive military experience and cabinet time during Franklin Pierce's presidency. With illustrious military leaders like Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Winfield Scott, "Fightin' Joe Hooker", and a military-trained president in Confederate President Jefferson Davis, it would seem an easy task to

find among Civil War leaders a large number of choices as the most effective strategist of the war. The great surprise then comes from a review of the primary players' performances which reveals that the greatest strategist of the Civil War was, in fact, the most unqualified, least credentialed person. Truly, the best strategist of the war proved to be Abraham Lincoln, the most unlikely candidate.

This most unlikely choice as the best strategist of the war must be reviewed in light of the tremendous turmoil present throughout Lincoln's entire presidency. Although he was personally opposed to slavery, Lincoln's presidential election platform was not an anti-slavery one, but one which was based on Lincoln's long-standing vision of preserving the Union. Elected in 1860 when the issue of state's rights had been at the forefront of American politics for several years, Lincoln was viewed by southern slave-holding states as a threat to their very existence.

Within a month of his November 1860 election, South Carolina had seceded from the Union to be followed by seven additional states before Lincoln even took office in March 1861. Ten days before Lincoln was inaugurated, Jefferson Davis was sworn in as President of the newly formed Confederate States of America. (9:7) So hostile were many citizens of the CSA to President-elect Lincoln that he actually received more than 300 written death threats prior to his inauguration. (7:142) Well substantiated rumors of an assassination attempt to occur as Lincoln passed through Baltimore on his way from Illinois for the inauguration so alarmed his guards that they convinced him to leave his



public train in Philadelphia. Lincoln was subsequently "smuggled" into Washington in secret for his own presidential inauguration. (4:8)

Inaugurated on 4 March 1861, Lincoln within the first week of his presidency had to decide how to handle the most serious threat to Union sovereignty at Fort Sumpter where attack by CSA forces seemed imminent. He had scarcely a month as president before the first shots of the Civil War were fired at Fort Sumpter on 12 April 1861. (10:211) The anguish of the Civil War Lincoln suffered during his presidency was further exacerbated by the sudden death of his dear twelve year old son Willie in February 1862 from the "fevers," most likely typhoid. (7:148) His wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown, refusing company and rarely leaving the White House for over a year. (7:148) Thus, Lincoln's presidency was wracked with turmoil and conflict in his personal life as well as from his role as Commander-in-Chief. His ability to formulate appropriate wartime strategy is even more remarkable when viewed in this light.

I'll discuss the primary reasons why Abraham Lincoln must be considered the best strategist of the war by addressing three principle areas. These include Lincoln's background and evidence he thought like a great military strategist, the strategy failures of the more qualified military leaders and Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and how the Union achieved victory by following Lincoln's strategy. I'll begin by discussing Lincoln's background and similarities in thought to some great military theorists and strategists of the past.

## **CHAPTER II - LINCOLN'S BACKGROUND AND MILITARY THOUGHT**

### **Background as Youth**

Abraham Lincoln's background was vastly different from that of his Civil War contemporaries. He grew up in poverty, spending several winters with his family in Indiana with only a three-sided lean-to for shelter. Lincoln's mother died when he was nine. His beloved stepmother Sarah wanted young Abe to receive as much schooling as he could despite the fact that his father was only barely able to sign his own name. All told, however, Lincoln's formal education his entire life totaled less than one year. (4:2-3) Using this rudimentary education, Lincoln taught himself to read and write. He proved to be a quick study, later teaching himself to be a surveyor in less than six weeks.

Eventually, Lincoln decided on the study of law while running a general store in Illinois. He was a self-taught lawyer, often walking 20 miles round trip to borrow law books at night and watching other lawyers in court to learn as much as he could. (4:3-5) Lincoln later used this same process - watching, studying, and then doing - as President to learn about war. He often said later that his training as a lawyer was invaluable to him because it was in the courtroom where Lincoln learned to persuade and motivate people. Although he was a master litigator, Lincoln always tried to get his clients to settle their differences outside the courtroom, thus denying himself legal fees in the process. An example of the type of selfless leadership Lincoln exhibited all his life, what was more important to him was that people were able to compromise and all achieve their goals if

possible. This early training in motivating people and understanding their objectives served him well considering his military background.

### **Military Background**

Abraham Lincoln's background in military affairs was virtually non-existent. He enlisted for 30 days in the Illinois militia in 1832 during the Blackhawk Indian War. He was elected captain by his fellow soldiers for the 30-day period; Lincoln chose to stay another 60 days as a private. Consequently, Lincoln's entire military experience consisted of 90 days in the militia during which he never fought in battle. (4:4) This review shows there can be no doubt that Abraham Lincoln was the least experienced in military affairs of any Civil War leader. Why then should he be considered a great war strategist?

### **Lincoln as Visionary for the People**

Abraham Lincoln's great understanding of human nature, his belief in his vision for the Union, and his ability to communicate his vision liken him to great military strategists and leaders of the past. Lincoln's understanding of human nature was legendary. During his presidency, the New York Herald printed: "Plain common sense, a kindly disposition, a straight forward purpose, and a shrewd perception of the ins and outs of poor, weak human nature have enabled him to master difficulties which would have swamped any other man." (9:34)

Lincoln was a friend of the common people, and ordinary citizens usually lined the halls of the executive mansion every day of his presidency waiting to see him. He was a

very accessible president and usually saw anyone who would travel to see him. In relating why he met with so many ordinary citizens, Lincoln said: "I tell you that I call these receptions my 'public opinion baths', for I have little time to read the papers and gather public opinion that way; and though they may not be pleasant in all particulars, the effect, as a whole, is renovating and invigorating." (9:17) This knowledge of people and his vision for the Union were formidable tools in formulating national and military strategy.

Abraham Lincoln had a long standing vision for the Union. He knew the Union must be preserved if the United States was to be a successful nation. He had long believed in his vision, giving his famous "A house divided against itself cannot stand" speech in 1858 during a series of debates for election to Congress. Lincoln also knew the value of fostering national will, of creating that delicate balance between the people, the government, and the army known as Clausewitz' "Remarkable Trinity." Lincoln had enthusiastically agreed to a series of debates with political rival Stephen Douglas in 1858, writing to a friend "With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions." (9:38)

Lincoln knew he must "sell" his vision of preserving the Union and set out to do just that. Lincoln was a master orator who generated resolve in citizens that the Civil War was a "just" one for the Union. "On the side of the Union," he said, "it was a struggle for maintaining in the world that form and substance of government whose leading object is

to elevate the condition of men...to afford all an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." (9:53) Lincoln was the original "Great Communicator," prompting popular newspaperman and Lincoln critic of the day Horace Greeley to write "Lincoln was a child of the common people, who made himself a great persuader, therefore a leader, by dint of firm resolve, and dogged perseverance." (9:170) This ability to understand people and persuade them of the value of preserving the Union were instrumental in his ability to formulate effective strategy for winning the war. In doing so, his actions were like great military theorists and leaders of the past. Following will be a few examples to illustrate.

### **Lincoln's Practice of Military Theorists**

Lincoln demonstrated great understanding of the principles of military greats like Clausewitz, Napoleon, and Sun Tzu although he never read them. Clausewitz wrote about objectives: "No one starts a war -- or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so -- without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it." (3:579) Lincoln knew his objective was to preserve the Union and formulated an appropriate military strategy to do so. His basic strategy was to blockade Southern ports, control the Mississippi River, hold the border states, and most importantly, defeat the Confederate army in offensive operations. (9:110).

Lincoln emulated Clausewitz again in determining how these objectives could be met. Clausewitz postulated that in a successful military strategy, one must determine the enemy's center of gravity, attack swiftly, and maintain the offensive. Lincoln rightly believed the Confederate Army was the center of gravity, telling Union General "Fightin'

Joe" Hooker "I think Lee's Army, and not Richmond, is your true objective point...Fight him when opportunity offers. If he stays where he is, fret him, and fret him." (9:29) Russell Weigley in his classic tome The American Way of War praises Lincoln's dedication to this Clausewitzian principle as he evaluates Lincoln's direction to his generals: "...he was always pounding away until his own superior resources permitted the Union army to survive while the enemy army was destroyed." (13:143) Lincoln again practiced Clausewitz' ideas in his rejection of Secretary of State Seward's suggestion to enter war with England to prevent its alliance with the southern states, cautioning Seward "We will fight only one war at a time." (9:29) Lincoln practiced other great military leaders' principles as well.

Like the great military leader and strategist Napoleon, Lincoln spent much time among his troops, evaluating the battlefield, and assessing the situation himself. (2:468-489) Lincoln well understood the importance of understanding the battlefield situation and conditions, even relieving General John C. Fremont from his command for Fremont's great weakness in exercising this principle. Upon relieving Fremont, Lincoln said: "His cardinal mistake is that he isolates himself, and allows nobody to see him; and by which he does not know what is going on in the very matter he is dealing with." (9:13) In contrast, Lincoln often rode his horse along the lines of troops, always with a kind word for them, as the troops cheered wildly. Lincoln would frequently stop and tell them of his vision for the Union and how important they were in achieving victory for the cause. He

also made it a point to inspect new weaponry personally to understand how it could best be used. (9:13-19)

Furthermore, Lincoln practiced Chinese military great Sun Tzu's theories on the importance of military intelligence. (12:145) He walked the two blocks to visit Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton in his office nearly every day, usually 2-3 times per day during critical battles. At times, Lincoln even spent the night in the telegraph office waiting for messages from the field. He wanted to witness major battles himself and when he could not do so, sent trusted confidants and advisors out to do it for him and report back as soon as possible. (9:15-21) Truly, Lincoln practiced the principles of the great military strategists as well or better than any other principle character in the war. This was a remarkable feat considering his lack of military experience, but a tribute to his tremendous intelligence, common sense, and ability to grasp the relationship between political and military objectives. I'll review more specific examples of his strategy successes and how it affected the outcome of the war after a review of his contemporaries' use of military strategy.

### **CHAPTER III - THE STRATEGIES OF LINCOLN'S CONTEMPORARIES**

Abraham Lincoln's success as a Civil War strategist is heightened when reviewing the strategy "performance" of his Union and Southern contemporaries in the war. His own Union military leadership was characterized for the majority of the war by experienced West Point-educated general officers who failed to implement military strategy appropriate to win the war. I'll briefly highlight some of his and the CSA's better-known leaders' strategy failures.

#### **The Union's First General in Chief**

Lincoln's Union began the Civil War with Major General Winfield Scott in charge of the Union army. Scott by all accounts should have been an excellent choice and Lincoln was more than ready to put his faith in the military professionals considering his own lack of military background. Scott was a lifetime soldier who led successfully in the Mexican War. He never seemed to understand the necessity for a Union offensive, however. His "Anaconda" plan was designed to choke off the South from northern and European supplies. The elderly Scott did not want to take the offensive, however, believing the Confederacy would eventually surrender after a lengthy time without necessary wartime and consumer goods. Lincoln rejected this passive plan due to his belief that the war was best won quickly and the Confederacy could surely hold out for years based on Scott's plan. Lincoln's removal of Scott to a less important position was only the beginning of a three and a half year quest to find a general who would implement his military strategy of taking the offensive.



## **McClellan**

Major General George McClellan was made general-in-chief of Union forces after Scott's removal. Another West Point graduate, McClellan was a master at organizing and training troops. Unfortunately, he was also reluctant to use them against the enemy. After spending months training his troops, McClellan had still not moved against the Confederacy. Finally, on 27 January 1862, Lincoln issued General War Order #1 in an effort to direct McClellan to take the offensive. The order stated that February 22nd was the day for "a general movement of the land and Naval forces of the United States against the insurgent forces." (9:119)

McClellan made no secret of the fact he believed Lincoln was rushing him and even refused to see Lincoln one evening when Lincoln came to visit McClellan at his home to discuss the plans for the offensive. When Lincoln's secretary protested McClellan's behavior to the President, Lincoln quietly answered "I'd hold his horse for him if only he would bring us success." (4:9) Unfortunately, McClellan ignored the war order and on 11 March 1862, Lincoln demoted him to the leadership of the Army of the Potomac. McClellan was relieved a few months later due to his failure to attack Lee's army when given an excellent opportunity to do so. Interestingly, McClellan later ran for President against Lincoln as the Democratic candidate in the 1864 presidential election. McClellan's replacement, Major General Henry W. Halleck, was made the next general-in-chief of Union forces on 11 July 1862.

## **Halleck**

Halleck should have been another excellent choice for Union general-in-chief. He was another West Point graduate and professional soldier. Lincoln had even read Halleck's book Elements of Military Art and Science before appointing him, assuring himself that this fine author could surely carry out his own writings. (9:122) Unfortunately, Halleck proved to be no better at military art and science than his predecessors. Within two months of appointment, Halleck's forces were defeated at the Second Battle of Bull Run at Manassas, Virginia, a defeat which unnerved him and made him ineffective for the rest of his tenure. Lincoln sadly observed to his Secretary of War that Halleck had "broke down - nerve and pluck gone - and has ever since evaded all possible responsibility - little more since that than a first-rate store clerk." (9:123) Halleck's failure was part of a trend of timidity common in the Union generals. Another well-known Union general guilty of failure to seize the offensive as needed was Major General "Fightin' Joe" Hooker, one of a series of generals in charge of the crucial Army of the Potomac.

## **"Fightin'Joe" as General in Charge**

Lincoln appointed General Hooker commander of the Army of the Potomac on 25 January 1863. (10:356) He was a West Point graduate and had been cited for bravery in the Mexican War. Hooker had earned his "Fightin'Joe" nickname as a result of his much ballyhoo-ed battlefield prowess. A veteran of many bloody Civil War battles, Hooker had been shot in the foot at Antietam but had stayed in the saddle on the field

with his men until the fighting was over. (10:357) He often spoke of the time when he would "take Richmond" and Lincoln feared that Hooker may actually be *too* confident as a major commander.

Unfortunately, Hooker proved to be a poor strategist when in command of a large force himself. His 130,000 strong Army of the Potomac was thoroughly beaten by Robert E. Lee at Chancellorsville in the spring. Hooker was distraught and unable to plan what to do next. Concerned, Lincoln visited Hooker after Chancellorsville with a letter. In it, Lincoln asked Hooker if he had "in his mind a plan wholly, or partially formed? If you have, prosecute it without interference from me. If you have not, please inform me, so that I, incompetent as I may be, can try to assist in the formation of some plan for the Army." (9:127) Unfortunately, Hooker was unable to formulate any plans or strategy for the Army of the Potomac.

### **Meade - The Last Great Hope?**

Lincoln chose Major General George Meade as leader of the Army of the Potomac after Hooker in 1863 because Meade was from Pennsylvania, the projected site of the next crucial battles. Confederate General Robert E. Lee was taking the offensive into the north near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and Lincoln knew the Union must not lose a major battle on its own soil. Meade was another West Point graduate and professional soldier whom Lincoln deemed would "fight well on his own dunghill" in the defense of Pennsylvania. (9:129)

Indeed, the famous battle of Gettysburg 1-3 July 1863 was a decisive victory for the Union army. After the battle, Meade followed Lee's severely wounded army as they retreated south to the Potomac River. In a classic example of the "friction" of war, high water at the Potomac prevented Lee's army from crossing until the waters receded. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia were trapped. Meade stalled, however, uncertain how or when to take the offensive to "finish off" Lee and his army. Seven days later, the waters of the Potomac receded and Lee and his army escaped.

Lincoln was dismayed since Lee's army was a crucial center of gravity Lincoln had identified long ago. Lincoln ruminated to his Secretary of War: "This is a dreadful reminiscence of McClellan. The same spirit that moved McClellan to claim a great victory because Pennsylvania and Maryland were safe. Will our generals never get that idea out of their heads? The whole country is our soil." (9:129) Clearly, Lincoln was thinking at the overall strategic level of war while his generals thought only at the operational level as they sought to protect particular states. Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, also recorded in his diary Lincoln's reaction to Meade allowing Lee to escape after Gettysburg. Hay wrote that Lincoln "referred to his own long cherished and often expressed conviction that if the enemy ever crossed the Potomac he might have been destroyed; he said that Meade and his army had expended the skill and toil and blood up to the ripe harvest and then allowed it to go to waste." (8:71) Handlin in Abraham Lincoln and the Union also documents the escape of Lee's army across the Potomac as the proverbial "last straw" for Lincoln when evaluating Meade's performance as a

commander. "We had them within our grasp" the President groaned. "We had only to stretch forth our hands and they were ours." (7:166)

As General Meade had settled in "watching the enemy as fast as he can," Lincoln knew he needed a new commander. (7:166) He had put his faith in the military generals, always giving each a chance to formulate and implement appropriate strategy for victory, and stood by them after failure. In fact, Lincoln often visited his defeated generals in the field to give them encouragement, particularly after a major defeat. After a sound defeat in the first Battle of Bull Run, Lincoln visited General Irwin McDowell in the field and told him "I have not lost a particle of confidence in you." (9:138) He visited Burnside after Fredericksburg, Hooker after Chancellorsville, and later Grant after he stalled at Petersburg. (9:138) It was clear, however, Lincoln had not yet found a general who would take the offensive as Lincoln deemed necessary. Fortunately for the Union, however, the Confederacy had many problems with formulating and implementing appropriate strategy as well. I'll next examine the strategy performance of two of the Confederate leaders.

### **Jefferson Davis as Strategist**

Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee are the best known Confederate figures of the Civil War. Although both were infinitely more qualified than Lincoln to serve as war strategists, they experienced serious strategy failures which eventually led to the defeat of the CSA. Lincoln's counterpart Jefferson Davis would have seemed a sure bet to "outstrategize" his Union foe. Davis was an 1828 graduate of West Point and served

seven years in frontier military posts and fighting the Blackhawk Indian War. He also served in 1846-47 as commander of the Mississippi contingent in the Mexican War. As a civilian, Jefferson Davis was in the forefront of military operations again during a very successful stint as Secretary of War in the cabinet of President Franklin Pierce from 1853-57. When southern states began to secede in late 1860 and the CSA was formed, Davis had hoped to lead its military. Instead, he was elected President, taking office 18 February 1861. (1:1) Surely, there were few more qualified to formulate successful national and military strategies for the newly formed Confederate States of America than President Jefferson Davis.

Unfortunately for the CSA, Jefferson Davis made some crucial strategy mistakes. Considering the large size and more limited resources of the South, Davis correctly chose an overall defensive strategy as had General George Washington during the Revolutionary War. The exception, however, was that Washington had kept his Continental Army concentrated. Davis, in an attempt to protect all CSA sea and land borders, scattered his forces. The result was a military that was weak at many points. (13:96-97)

Davis probably also made an error in allowing the capitol to be moved to Richmond, Virginia from Montgomery, Alabama deep in the heart of the Confederacy. A nation's capital had been long identified as a crucial center of gravity by strategists such as Clausewitz and Sun Tzu; a capital at Richmond was very close to the enemy and vulnerable. It was within easy marching distance of the large Army of the Potomac and

almost within reach of the powerful Union Navy on the tidal estuaries. (13:105) Much effort and manpower was expended protecting Richmond; Montgomery would have required little protection in the early years of the war.

Finally, Davis failed to get his generals, primarily Robert E. Lee, to properly implement the CSA's overall defensive strategy. Davis' failure to contain Lee and prevent him from going on the offensive was significant in the defeat of the CSA. Robert E. Lee, hero of the Confederacy, ultimately failed to properly carry out strategy.

### **The Great Robert E. Lee as Strategist**

General Robert E. Lee was wedded to traditional style Napoleonic warfare, a strategy mismatch for the CSA's overall defensive strategy. While he enjoyed some brilliant victories, Lee's preferred method of offensive battles of annihilation led to his Army of Northern Virginia's eventual defeat. In the Seven Day's Battles for Richmond 25 June-1 July 1862, Lee continually took the offensive against the large and more well-armed Army of the Potomac, losing 20,000 of his 80,000 men. (13:107-108)

At the Second Battle of Bull Run, Robert E. Lee took the offensive again, winning the battle but losing another 20% of his army. (13:107-108) He failed to see that his limited resources dictated a defensive strategy. Unfortunately, his obsession with the offensive battle of annihilation continued. Lee marched his army into Maryland, mustering less than 50,000 against 75,000 or more at Antietam. In The American Way of War, Russell F. Weigley states "There was no prospect of destroying the Federal Army; there was a much more likely prospect of the destruction of Lee's own army, if it should be mauled

by McClellan's superior numbers with the barrier of the Potomac behind it." (13:111) Lee took losses of 13,700 men at Antietam with more deserting every day. Most deserters cited moral conflicts with going on the offensive with the CSA's supposed "defensive" posture. (13:111)

A final example of Lee's disastrous dedication to an inappropriate strategy occurred at Gettysburg 1-3 July 1863. Facing a larger force with limited supplies of his own, Lee had 23,000 men dead or wounded. As a result, his offensive capacity was virtually destroyed for the rest of the war. (13:117) In failing to implement a more appropriate defensive military strategy, General Robert E. Lee, hero of the South, had destroyed his own army.

Thus, this review of Union and Confederate strategists further emphasizes the strategic effectiveness of Lincoln. It will be useful to examine more specific examples of Lincoln's strategy successes and the Union victory which became imminent when Lincoln found a general to implement his strategy.



#### **CHAPTER IV - LINCOLN'S STRATEGY PREVAILS**

More specific examples of Lincoln's strategy successes show deliberate military planning activities worthy of the most revered military strategists. Lincoln was a risk-taker and, like Clausewitz and Napoleon, believed in offensive operations. He also, however, showed wise restraint at the beginning of the war, allowing the Confederacy to "fire the first shots." When informed that Confederate forces appeared likely to attack Fort Sumpter, Lincoln made the shrewd decision to resupply the fort and wait for the CSA to attack. At this point, Lincoln had decided that a war to preserve the Union was inevitable. Rather than begin the offensive, however, Lincoln believed it was important to let the CSA attack first. The CSA's firing on Fort Sumpter had the dual effect of both starting the war and enraging the citizens of the Union. (9:22) Once the CSA had officially started the war, Lincoln then was justified in quick, decisive military action backed by strong public support. It gave the Union, from the onset, a more moral and "just" cause for fighting the Confederacy. (9:89)

#### **Lincoln as Detailed Military Planner**

Lincoln also showed great ability to implement more detailed military strategy. In doing so, he demonstrated Clausewitzian "military genius" with his innate understanding of what to do and determination to carry out his plans. In May 1862, Lincoln traveled to Fort Monroe, Virginia, with Secretary of War Stanton to personally review the critical Hampton Roads area held by the CSA. He asked Major General George McClellan to come with him; McClellan declined, saying he was "too busy at the front." After arriving

at Fort Monroe, Lincoln reviewed the situation with local military leaders. Based upon that assessment, Lincoln ordered the bombardment of CSA batteries, personally walked ashore and picked a safe place for amphibious landing of Union troops, and directed the attack from Fort Monroe. Under his direct guidance, the Union captured the city of Norfolk. (9:120)

Interestingly, this example of Lincoln's ability to make detailed strategy decisions could have come directly from the current Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations. In it, commanders are directed to use the "analytical framework of Mission, Enemy, Troops, Terrain, and Time Available (METT-T) to designate physical objectives" to accomplish their missions. (5:2-4) Clearly, Lincoln was ahead of his time. His successful direction of the capture of Norfolk is especially poignant in light of an incident reported by his aide the day before the operation took place. Having already laid out the plans for the capture operation to take place the next day, Lincoln sat reading Shakespeare in his room at Fort Monroe. His young son Willie had died of typhoid fever less than sixty days earlier. After a time, he called in his aide and said: "Colonel, did you ever dream of a lost friend, and feel that you were holding sweet communion with that friend, and yet have a sad consciousness that it was not a reality? Just so I dream of my boy Willie." With that, Abraham Lincoln dropped his head on the table and sobbed aloud. (6:149)

Another example of Lincoln's strategic wisdom was his ability to place force in the appropriate place. When McClellan was repulsed by Lee, McClellan pleaded with Lincoln for reinforcements. Lincoln refused McClellan's request, saying he would not

remove troops from the more successful campaigns in the West. Weigley in The American Way of War appraises this action: "He made the decision, not so common among strategists as it should be, not to reinforce failure but to press harder where there was already success, in the West." (13:136)

### **Lincoln Uses National Strategy in Pursuit of Military Objectives**

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, known for its moral "rightness" in freeing the slaves, also had strategic significance. By proclaiming slaves free, the Proclamation also could have deprived the South of a major portion of the large black labor force upon which it was dependent. The slaves had kept a large portion of the agricultural and industrial base of the South alive, thereby freeing the white male population to fight against the Union armies. (13:138)

A final example of Lincoln's own strategic wisdom was in his formulation of peace terms. He encouraged surrender with ready readmission to the Union, no war reparations, and rebuilding programs for the South. In his second inaugural address, Lincoln did not speak of the great Union victory which appeared imminent. Instead, he used his address to encourage the Confederate states to come back to the Union and make their readjustment as easy as possible. His gentle and compassionate encouragement for surrender came to be known as one of Lincoln's most famous speeches:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. (11:321)

This speech encouraged honorable surrender while a more volatile version to "fire up" the Union may have lengthened the war by strengthening the South's national will. While traditionally viewed as an example of Lincoln's compassion for the defeated South, this speech should be viewed in a strategic light as well.

### **Lincoln Finds his General**

However, the final road to victory for the Union had actually begun a year or so earlier when Lincoln found a general who believed in and would implement Lincoln's offensive military strategy. Ulysses S. Grant, graduating near the bottom of his West Point class and slovenly in dress and nature, was the unlikely military hero of the Union forces. He ended Abraham Lincoln's three and a half year quest for a general to carry out his military strategy for victory.

### **Grant's History of Success in the West**

Ulysses S. Grant started a trend of victories in the West which brought him to Lincoln's attention. Grant was not well-liked by his fellow officers, and critics urged his dismissal after he was rumored to be drunk at the Battle of Shiloh. Lincoln's only response was "I can't spare this man. He fights." (9:14) Grant continued to experience success in the West through his aggressive style. He took the offensive for Vicksburg 1-19 May 1863, marching 180 miles and fighting five battles. He succeeded in splitting the Confederate forces in half and clamped Vicksburg in the siege. The Confederates surrendered on 4 July with 30,000 prisoners, more than 50,000 captured muskets and

rifles, the entire Mississippi River reopened to navigation by Union forces, and a huge moral blow to the Confederacy. (13:140)

A few months later, Grant rode to Chattanooga to relieve Union General Rosecrans and within a month won impressive battles at Missionary Ridge and Lookout Mountain, Tennessee. Despite these impressive victories, however, Grant's peers continued to complain about him. To a delegation indignant about Grant's drinking problem, Lincoln replied that if he "but knew the general's brand, I'd send every other commander a barrel of the whiskey." (7:166)

### **Grant as General in Chief**

Grant continued his string of successful offensives until Lincoln appointed him General-in-Chief of Union forces on 10 March 1864. By special act of Congress, the rank of Lieutenant General was resurrected to bestow on Grant. Upon appointing Grant, Lincoln declared to his staff: "Grant is the first general I have had. You know how it has been with all the rest. They wanted me to be the general. I am glad to find a man who can go ahead without me." (9:42) Grant proved to be worthy of Lincoln's faith in him. Lincoln and Grant worked well together, Lincoln directing Grant via telegram to "hold on with a bulldog grip, and chew and choke as much as possible." Grant agreed and in his typical determined style telegrammed back: "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer." (9:133)

### Lincoln Feels the Burden of his Strategy

It would be remiss at some point not to mention the great anguish Lincoln often expressed about the great number of casualties suffered by both sides during the Civil War. He well knew the consequences of an offensive strategy and often visited the military hospitals in Washington DC to visit the wounded soldiers. An incident recorded in Anthony Gross' The Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln illustrates the great compassion Lincoln felt for those wounded in the war:

Once as he drove up to a hospital, Lincoln saw one of the inmates walking directly in front of his team, and he cried out to the driver to stop. Lincoln got out and saw that the soldier, only a boy, had been shot in both eyes. He took the blind soldier by the hand, and in trembling tones asked for his name, service, and residence. "I am Abraham Lincoln," he said as he was leaving, and the sightless face of the youth lit with gratitude as he listened to the President's words of honest sympathy. The next day, the chief of the hospital laid in the boy's hands a commission as first lieutenant in the US Army, bearing the President's signature, and with it, an order retiring him on three-quarters pay for the rest of his life. (6:204)

Similarly, Lincoln was well-known for granting pardons to prisoners on both sides, declaring he would do whatever he could to save a life since the war had taken so very many. Families of prisoners from both the South and the Union traveled to see Lincoln at the White House to plead with him for pardons for their erstwhile sons, husbands, nephews, and cousins. He granted pardons in almost every case. His Union generals begged him not to pardon so many Union soldiers sentenced to die, telling him he would destroy their attempts at developing discipline if he continued to pardon deserters and those committing other infractions. Lincoln, however, put top priority on reviewing the cases of those sentenced to die, often making senators and other important dignitaries

wait as he took the time to meet with the families of those to be executed. "There are already too many weeping widows," Lincoln insisted, when objections were made that he had forbidden the shooting of twenty-four deserters in a row. "For God's sake, don't ask me to add to the number, for I won't do it." (6:194)

Lincoln's great compassion garnered the love and admiration of those pardoned and their families if not of his generals. In a poignant example of the great admiration and loyalty Lincoln created:

In pardoning a young lad condemned to death for falling asleep at his post, Lincoln said: "I could not think of going into eternity with the blood of that poor young man on my skirts. It is not to be wondered at that a boy raised on a farm, probably in the habit of going to bed at dark, should, when required to watch, fall asleep; and I cannot consent to shoot him for such an act." The sequel to this act of mercy came to light when the dead body of this boy was found on the battlefield at Fredericksburg, and next to his heart a photograph of the President, across which the soldier had written, "God bless Abraham Lincoln." (6:191)

Despite the suffering and great numbers of dead and wounded, Lincoln knew he still had to continue the offensive in order to save the Union. He and Grant knew they were close if they could only continue the course of action begun by Grant the year before in the campaigns of the West.

### **Grant Continues to Implement Lincoln's Strategy**

Lincoln had finally found his general to take the offensive and mount simultaneous attacks. Victory would follow not long after Lincoln's strategy was finally implemented. Grant sent main Union armies against Lee and Johnston and smaller forces against Richmond and the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad. He tightened the naval blockade and

then seized the remaining Confederate seaports. (13:143-144) Grant picked subordinate generals like himself, most memorably William Tecumseh Sherman whose march through Tennessee and Georgia to Savannah took the offensive to the civilian populace and greatly lessened their national will to continue fighting.

General Phil Sheridan took his commander's lead also, fighting Lee's forces in offensive operations. Lincoln himself could sense when initiative was key and spent the last half of March and first part of April 1865 visiting troops in the field in attempts to spur them on toward victory. (9:24) After Lincoln's visits to the field, Sheridan wired to Grant that he was close to victory over Lee's army and "If the thing be pressed, I think Lee will surrender." Grant showed the telegram to Lincoln who sent a one sentence reply: "Let the thing be pressed." (9:135)

Two days later, 9 April 1865, Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse. Though most of his previous military leaders had disagreed with him, Abraham Lincoln had finally seen his strategy through implementation and victory.



## CHAPTER V - CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was the most unqualified and least likely principle player of the Civil War, Union President Abraham Lincoln, who proved to be the most effective strategist. He served our country with dogged determination and set out to save what our forefathers had set forth nearly a century before. That he was able to exercise strategic brilliance throughout the Civil War is especially remarkable in light of the fact he had been president scarcely a month before the war began. His entire presidency was wracked with turmoil from the war, some severe personal setbacks, and in an eerie premonition of things to come, Lincoln told Uncle Tom's Cabin author Harriet Beecher Stowe at dinner one evening "Whichever way the conflict ends, I have the impression that I shan't last long after it's over." (4:9)

He was right, of course, assassinated within five days of Lee's surrender at Appomattox Courthouse by John Wilkes Booth, a southern sympathizer. Lincoln had persevered throughout the war, however, and the evidence examined in this paper shows that Abraham Lincoln made strategic decisions worthy of military greats like Napoleon, Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu. This paper also examined Lincoln's success in contrast to the failures of his more qualified contemporaries, and finally, it discussed some specific examples of Lincoln's strategy successes that ultimately led to victory for the Union.

Aspiring leaders and strategists may take lessons from Lincoln's unqualified success in saving the Union. Much has been written of Lincoln's great leadership qualities, and it was these qualities that helped him overcome his lack of military experience to formulate

a winning military strategy. Some lessons to be taken from this review of Lincoln's performance include the importance of critical thinking versus academic learning, a clearly defined vision and the ability to communicate it, knowing how to deal with people, and persistence in striving for objectives. Clearly, despite an unremarkable military background, Abraham Lincoln was the unlikely best strategist of the Civil War.

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